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SALT II preliminaries

The first SALT agreement of 1972 found the U.S. Senate as agreeable as it had been eight years earlier to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution — not, to be sure, a very felicitous parallel. It may therefore seem strange that the successor agreement announced this week is thought to be in some danger of rejection.

Why this reversal of prospects? So far as we know, there is no clearly substantiated case of serious "cheating" by the Soviet Union on SALT-I; nor has there been a drastic shift in the political alignment of the Senate. It is perhaps of minor significance that Richard Nixon, who had made a career of anti-Soviet "toughness," was the sponsor of the first SALT agreement, and accordingly assumed to be a reluctant bargainer — as Mr. Carter has not been.

But those considerations are probably marginal. Far the most important difficulty, we suspect, is the growing worry that what the U.S. seeks in strategic arms control and what the Soviet Union seeks may not be one and the same. Is SALT-II, for the Soviet Union, a valuable compromise or an opportunity for U.S. acquiescence in her well-documented buildup of worldwide strategic power? Passionate views are held on both sides of this question; they are sure to figure in the debate.

Most of us will, in any case, want to see and examine the text of the treaty, yet to be drafted, before reaching final conclusions.

It may be more appropriate, on the morrow of the announcement of accord, to preview a few of the issues likely to affect Senate deliberation — not only the political hazards for an administration that has made SALT-II the centerpiece of its foreign policy; not only the critical pressure points in the agreement itself; but the assets that may eventually weigh in favor of ratification.

If we were running the administration's political strategy, we would advise President Carter to avoid several tactics with which his "SALT-sellers" already seem to be toying: the temptation to invoke a dubious claim that the president, as a former officer in the nuclear navy, enjoys some mysterious expertise in the complex field of strategic weapons; the temptation to link the issue of national security with the issue of nuclear safety raised by the Three Mile Island accident; the temptation to turn the Panama Canal ratification strategy inside out, in effect, by using the evident preponderance of public opinion as a decisive argument in the SALT agreement's favor. (If a high percentage of those polled "favor" an arms control agreement, one can be pretty sure that the sentiment rests on the universal zeal for peace and safety far more than on a grasp of the technical questions). Finally, there is the temptation to depict serious opponents and critics as in some way animated by "right-wing" or anti-peace sentiment. Some of them may be. But what is at issue, after all, is not the desirability of peace, nor the avoidance of nuclear catastrophe, nor restraint and stability in the arms race, but how best to achieve those goals.

Certain critical points in the agreement will predictably weigh heavily with the Senate. Among these are the reaction of European allies to the U.S. agreement to restrict cruise missile ranges and the distribution to them of cruise technology; the supreme issue of U.S. Minuteman vulnerability in the early 1980s, and what the administration promises, apart from the treaty, to do about it; the issue of the ranges of the Soviet "Backfire" bomber and the encoding of Soviet missile test telemetry — both of which seem to be left to a substantial degree of self-policing judgments by the Russians. And finally, there is the unresolved debate about verification, with emphasis on the importance of the lost Iranian monitoring stations.

So far, at least, while critics of the agreement have advanced some telling arguments of detail no single issue they raise has caught fire or clearly imperils ratification. The administration's main task will be to ease a mood of general suspicion, and to draw bellwethers of debate like Henry Kissinger into its corner; and that can best be managed by detailed and specific answers to specific questions.

Our hunch is that the debate will finally center on the question of what kind of game the Soviets are up to in the world — whether their primary loyalties are to revolutionary mischief sustained by nuclear blackmail or to nuclear stability — or if divided between the two, as they now seem, in what proportion divided.

There is evidence of this division of Soviet loyalties — enough to make it a formidable task to convince the Senate by sometime next fall that the Soviet Union will be a reliable and cooperative partner in the great imperative, which all of us favor, of stabilizing the nuclear arms race.